The Nature of God

THE PLACE OF REASON IN RELIGION

•

NO. 1 OF A SERIES

DELIVERED SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 4, 1945

by

DUNCAN E. LITTLEFAIR, B.D., Ph.D.

Minister of

FOUNTAIN STREET BAPTIST CHURCH

GRAND RAPIDS, MICHIGAN

VOL. I - NO. 2

THE NATURE OF GOD

A Series of Sermons for Inquiring Minds

February 4th—
THE PLACE OF REASON IN RELIGION
Why should we analyze or criticize or compare?
Is one religion as good as another?

* February 11th—
IS THERE A PLACE IN RELIGION FOR THE SUPERNATURAL?
What is the relationship of natural law to religious thought?

February 18th—
CAN WE PROVE THE EXISTENCE OF GOD?
What are the traditional arguments?
Is there any value in humanism?

* February 25th—
THE NATURE OF GOD
An attempt to specifically describe the nature of God.

* March 4th—
IS GOD A PERSON?
A consideration of the traditional problems concerning the "personality" of God.

March 11th—
THE INJUSTICE OF GOD

* March 18th—
DOES GOD ANSWER PRAYER?

March 25th—
THE PSYCHOLOGICAL APPROACH TO GOD

* It is suggested that these sermons are most important for the development of the theme.

The Place of Reason in Religion

● There is a growing lack of inclination to analyze, investigate, and compare ideas, sects, faiths, and religions. We like to think that we are all the same. There is abroad the feeling that there can be an amicable religion in which all the peoples of the world can come together as one religious group, and that world-wide conventions may be held. Great to-do is made over the attempt to arrange for people of all of these various colors and creeds and sects to have Holy Communion together, all this as though there were any intrinsic good to be derived by individuals who are able to sit down together and go through a simple ritual of that sort. It is not that they do things together. It is not that they are interested in the same ends. It is rather to ask, "What are the ends that they are seeking?"

I am sure that in any group or in any city, you will find extremes of religious ends that are entirely incompatible. There is absolutely no use in closing your eyes to that incompatibility.

The obect of this series is to try to help you in your religious thinking; to clarify your belief; to discern the foundations upon which you base your belief, and to check its soundness. Then to aid you in criticizing and testing your belief that it may be confirmed or denied if unworthy.

When we try to avoid this sort of approach to religion, and shy away from problems like this, there is something wrong in our attitude or in our way of living or with our thoughts. It is as though we knew there was a skeleton in the closet, and we refuse to allow anyone to open that closet. We keep it locked. Or it means that we are afraid to face the problem because we know we do not have the resources with which to meet it. I suppose at times that is a just and legitimate reason to avoid issues. Man must have adequate resources with which to meet his problems. A man breaks when a sudden crisis overwhelms him, and he feels that his resources are inadequate. But his resources ought to be adequate. They are adequate and ample and are here ready for us to utilize, if only we will.

If that is not the reason we are afraid to struggle with such problems, it is, then, perhaps due to a worse cause. That is the feeling of indifference toward the major issues which separate or envelope us. Such a feeling presumes that things in life are not

very important, and if one can go on living comfortably why stir up trouble. In other words, one is not concerned with the processes upon which life has been developed to its present state, and which if further developed, it would lead to higher things.

Or, finally, perhaps avoidance of such critical analysis of religious views is because of a basic distrust in reason, its powers, and its capacities.

● When you say that fundamentalists and liberals are working to achieve the same goal, you are making a big error. You are hiding your head in the sand. They are not. Fundamentalists have not, and they will not as long as they go on in the avowed philosophy that they now have.

When you say, let us not raise issues between Roman Catholicism and Protestantism, you are making a grave error. If there are basic issues there that are important, we ought to know what they are. We ought to be aware of the basis upon which the differences can be resolved. It will help nothing and hurt a great deal to cover these divergencies with bland optimism and brotherliness that has no real foundation. Obviously, that does not mean that you attack Catholics, as Catholics, or as individuals. There is no reason and no dignity in that. But if there are basic differences in philosophies — and there are — we ought to know what they are. You never achieve a really friendly basis with anyone until you each understand just where you do stand on particular important issues.

If we are trying to achieve an organic unity comparable to a situation of Love, it is even more important. Not only should we each understand where the other stands, but that we find some way of bringing those view-points together.

There is evidence, I think, of a growing chasm between reason and religion. We are divorcing reason and religion because we are trying to achieve a soft kind of peace. We seem afraid to question further. When you start to question, it often means that the whole thing is thrown into turmoil. We do not like confusion. Basically that is the reason why we are living on such a superficial, confused and perplexed plane in this modern world. We don't question and thereby get down to basic principles. You can never overcome confusion and perplexity until you dig deep enough to find basic principles. The only thing that will give you guides and standards by means of which to delineate life in all the chaotic confusion is in the use and exercise of

reason, which is that quality that distinguishes Man apart from all other creatures.

There has always been this chasm between reason and religion, but it is less so at certain periods. It is much more divisive now than it has ever been before because now, for one of the first times in the history of religion, there is an avowed philosophic purpose of destroying reason. Not only do we avoid paying attention to it, we will not grant that it ought to have attention. In the past, they would at least acknowledge its authority, even though they then went about and disregarded it. But now the leaders of our churches, and our secular societies are openly disavowing that there is any attempt to thwart logic and reason in religion.

This movement began, I think, in large part, with the revivals of the Nineteenth Century. You will remember that the revival movement had a great influence in England, and over here in America, it became characteristic of our national religious life. In England it was a revival of the decadent and rather academic sort of Church of England. Over here it became *the* religious movement of the American people. It has continued on in that manner. It is a frontier sort of religion. The Baptists and the Methodists, perhaps because of our basic nature or our short history or because of the principles upon which our Churches were established, took it up and made most use of this revivalism.

So religious leaders began to speak in the highest possible terms and to cultivate the emotions most assiduously. If, as an evangelist, you could arouse a person to a pitch of frenzy, you could guide and direct that person as you would. Preachers didn't try to convince the convert's mind. They went about arousing his emotions. They did it by means of music and surroundings. They worked on the drabness of the frontiersman's life and his need for a little color and emotion in all of his drudgery. Out of that situation this emotional emphasis arose and was accelerated.

● Now, it seems as though our churches are divided. The largest mass of them still working on that subterranean level of emotionalism and fear. Without reason some of them, having revolted from it, swing to the other extreme as characterized by the Unitarians, with an over-degree of emphasis upon the intellect. The one starved to death because of lack of mind and the other starved because of lack of feeling. Now, I chose the Unitarians simply as an illustration of a great class of churches that share the same fault in more or less degree.

Some of the modern philosophers like Dewey, have contributed to this chasm of understanding by speaking of mind and body as though they were two different things, not dependent upon each other. This has created specialists on each side with the chasm splitting wider and wider apart. Now, some of us are quite convinced that if a religion is to be any good at all, it must conform to the frontier character of high frenzy, and that as soon as reason is introduced into it, you are accused of deserting the true basis of your faith. Or, perhaps you are accused of being a lecturer, not a preacher, a philosopher, not a religious person.

● That is the state in which we find ourselves today. But the real point is, that there is no genuine split between them at all. There is no natural chasm there, none whatever. Reason and religion are and should be one and the same thing. You can not have a good religion without exercising reason. You cannot have emotions without the exercise of reason unless you want to destroy yourself.

Just how are reason and religion related? First of all, it ought to be clear to us that religion did not arise in and through reason. Religion is primary. It is a fundamental quality within Man. It lies below all of this thought world of ours. It springs from the very depth of Man's inner-most being. It is a physiological propulsion to use a large but simple term. Religion always comes where there are people, because of the very nature of the organism, but Man is religious because he is rational. And yet, I will repeat, religion did not arise in, through and because of reason. I am aware that that statement is in partial contradiction and I am putting it that way to emphasize a point which I want to make clear.

All the other animals exist on the basis of their instinct. Their reasoning powers are very, very limited. They do not need much, except as their human masters try to teach them tricks. They continue to live in the way in which they were designed to live. They do not need much reason. Instinct sees them through. We will admit that it sees them through rather well. Animals are self-sufficient very early in their careers because these instincts go to work for them. But the human being is dependent for some years because we do not have those instincts to see us through. Somehow, somewhere, because of the rise of reason, we have largely lost them.

As this mind of ours grew up, our instincts sank. With the rise of reason, life became complicated. You have to think ahead because you devised instrumentalities, constructed institutions, and built societies. All this meant the need for planning. The more you planned and built, the further away you brought yourself from that basic matrix of elemental life out of which you arose.

Now we find ourselves in this highly developed civilization a long, long, long way from what you would call a normal animal life. Here we are with our instincts almost nil. Our only hope of rescue lies in a deeper and better adaptation of that power and capacity of reason which brought us up out of that elemental matrix, and made us what we are. We must be developed further to bring us out of the mess which we have brought upon ourselves.

One thinker has put it this way. There is the sub-rational; then there is the rational; and then there is the super-rational. The sub-rational is that instinctive area that you might call our unconscious minds of which we are unaware. It is physiological.

Love, hunger, and language, like religion, are not created by the mind. They arise because of the kind of organisms we are. No man sat down and created a language. It grew. No man said, "Well, now, let's have love." It was there, and it grew.

It is in that sub-rational area in which religion began to function. It grew because of what we were. If we had not had that thing to begin with, or had not been that which we were, or if we had not had the capacity for reason, we would have had no need for religion. Religion then, would not have come into being. We would have gone on without it like the animals. Animals have no religion. But because of that inextricable combination, we grew up into rational life.

● These are not to be separated in the matter of time. Let me caution you, we have this sub-rational working on us today. But this sub-rational has come into our reason or understanding so that now we do understand some of these things that were, and are, basic with us. We can begin to comprehend them. Scientists and psychologists and philosophers and common-sense began to play on them. But reason is not the end. Reason is our only way of taking these sub-rational, physiological propulsions and directing them so that more of that super-rational, or that part of experience which the mind can never completely embrace, becomes more familiar, and more important to us. The mind takes this

propulsion and uses it and shapes it and directs it so that we can share so much more richly in all this abundant world of experience that lies around us.

Reason only points to and helps to define and delineate this abundant experience. When you find this abundance, life is so much richer and deeper and meaningful than you had thought it to be, even at the height of your past thinking.

● There are a lot of misuses of reason. It is those misuses which have led so many people to denounce and discard reason. We have already dealt with the first reason, which is our deep-lying unwillingness to disturb things. It is that unwillingness to face problems. It is that unwillingness to dig and to build.. It is that old aimal instinct to settle down on the most comfortable level you can find, and smooth over everything so that you will not be disturbed. So, you die in your shell.

There are some misuses of religion that have brought it into disfavor with thinking people who otherwise would not be opposed to it. Such misuses as these are serious. Men do their thinking. Men play with their thinking. They build beautiful pictures and dreams of worlds that might be. They construct elaborate structures of thought, like mathematics and other sciences of that sort. They remove their thinking and themselves from this world of reality. They are the tender-minded people to whom we referred last week. They want to preserve the delicacy and the beauty of things. So they rear their imaginary, idealistic worlds. These fellows are called idealists. Other people know that they can not play in that kind of a world. They know that they are way down here where things are going on, and they can see no connection between the two levels. It is then that they say, "If that is reason, let us get rid of reason. It is only for these stuffy philosophers who live in ivory towers." And they are right. They have good reason on their side.

Another misuse of reason, that has brought it into disfavor, is the tendency to think that because you have pointed to an object, and because you have discussed and developed it, clarified it and outlined it, you have exhausted it. You remember I said previously that is not the function of reason. People who really live, even uneducated or dull people, know that because you have talked about a thing does not mean to say that you have exhausted it. You have simply talked about it. You have not even touched it until you begin to experience it and live with it. And so they say, "If that is the purpose of reason, then let's dispense with it."

Another misuse of reason is that we have a tendency to make our propositions absolute. The fundamentalists and certain others always talk in terms of absolutes. People who deal in reason are subect to the same fault. When we scientifically establish a truth, as completely as we can, for our present state of knowledge, we then say that this is true, and we maintain that we have proved it. To us it is eternally and absolutely and finally true. Another man, perhaps not quite so learned, may have the feeling that in the past things that have been proved absolutely, unalterably true have later been proved untrue, says, "If that is reason, of what use is it?"

Another great misuse of reason, and I have touched on this in the previous one, is the tendency to make reason an end in itself, to substitute reason for rich reality. We are all guilty of that. People in my kind of work are much more prone to rationalize than others because we live in a world of thought. When we develop ideas, we are often so enraptured with their beauty and their apparent truth and with their verifiability that we neglect to dig into them to get out of them all that warmth of rich human life.

Because a thing or process is misused is no real condemnation of its virtue or value. There is no single thing in life or in the body of man that cannot be misused. But misuse is never, in itself, an adequate reason for the rejection of that instrument. In the case of reason, it is much less so than in a good many other things.

If you are not going to use reason, what else can you use? What are the alternatives to reason?

There are a fair number of them. I could have started with these and built the whole sermon around them. I am anxious, in this series, however, to give you a glimpse of many subjects, and to cover as much as I can so that you will be able to go back over them and play with them for yourselves.

● Among these alternatives to reason is, first of all, intuition or inner-truth. It is that feeling that you know something is true because it wells up and surges within you. So you postulate it, feeling that the very vividness of that thing and its very strength in you must make it right. It is an inner-truth that never gets out into the realm of reason or verification. You just know it, and so you protect it and nourish it within yourself.

I am reminded of a simple statement by a great philosopher who said, "Inner-truth is like a wax nose which any knave may

mold to suit his face." That is, so often, what we do with our inner-truths. We mold them to suit ourselves. They are products of our physiological propulsions and of our frustrations and desires. Sometimes they are very good. Sometimes they are very worthy, but very often, if not most of the time, they are not good and they are not true and they are not worthy. That is another of the reasons why we do not like to subject them to test, to throw them into the arena of open discussion. We clutch them to our bosoms and we nurse them where no one will see them and disturb them. That kind of inner-truth, no matter how strongly you may believe in it, is not necessarily true and worthy. When you are so convinced by the strength of some inner-truth, remember the great demon, Hitler, and his erroneous convictions.

● Another alternative to reason, in deciding an issue, is faith. This is much more common in religion. They are really much the same thing. A man has faith in something. He has a deep and abiding feeling. It is a faith that has sustained and carried him through things. So, being sure it is right, he will not allow anything to interfere with it. He will not allow any notion of inconsistency or inadequacy to touch him. He will not allow anyone to reason about it because he believes in it, and so he holds on to it. Very, very often our faiths are good. But very, very often they are not. The only way in which we will ever come to bring our various personal faiths together is to find a common ground upon which they can be built, and a common standard by means of which they may be judged, and a common language by means of which they may be interpreted, one to the other. That is the only way there is.

One great philosopher has said, "I have observed that every religious sect and every person is perfectly willing to use reason when it helps him, but when it fails him, then he says this is a matter of faith and therefore above reason." If I have heard that once in recent experiences, I have heard and seen it a hundred times. And among some of our leading church writers, faith is above reason when reason is apt to contradict it. But if you can find reason to support faith, you use it.

Now there is something wrong with that kind of double bookkeeping. If reason has no relationship to faith, it will not support it, and so if you have your faith which reason cannot support, you have got to remove it entirely from the realm of reason. Otherwise, you ought to put your views right down in the arena and discuss them on a rational basis.

Another alternative is authority. A Catholic friend said to me not long ago, "When you are driving a car on the street and you see a red light, you stop even though there may not be anything coming. But the law says you are not to go through that red light. So you don't. You obey the law. So it is in my religion. When the Church says, 'You should not do this or that,' I don't do it. I am obeying that same kind of authority."

You see the fallacy in that. This red light authority can be explained and justified in the open arena to any intelligent citizen of a community? That is trading in on authority when you substitute rules and ritual and say, "Obey them because we say so." Who is the "we"? What right have they to lay down rules for other people? Are they good rules? Do they work out toward some end which in itself may be justified and supported? The only way you can arrive at anything like that is through the use of reason.

Then, as an alternative to reason, there is also revelation. We will get to this again. Revelation means that this vision has been given to you by God. You know that it must be true, because of the validation you have. Usually to go back to it, it is an intuition or a faith, but revelations have a way of being very diverse. I have in mind the story of a rather elderly woman, close to 80, who after close association with her husband, had a revelation from God that her husband had lost favor in God's sight, and that he should be killed. She actually killed him. You say it was not a revelation. How are you going to prove it was not a revelation, except by the use of reason?

Loyalty to the group is one of the most common alternatives to reason. "It is not to reason why. It is but to do or die," and so loyalty to the group is built up, and whatever the group says is right, or the nation says is right, you do it and you do not question it.

● Another alternative is thinking with the "blood" or superiority of one race over others. It is the same thing. When you realize the sources of some of these ideas, and you have seen what they have done to our world through their adoption by some of these nations' leaders, you begin to realize where we brought ourselves by our unwillingness to delve into reason and to use it, hard and laborious as it may be.

There is only one way to hold the world together, and that is through reason. Now there are other ways that are tried. For instance, there is tradition, and there is force, and there is reason.

It should be plain that in our day there is no one sustaining tradition strong enough to see us through any great crisis, even including our American traditions. They are all too confusing and perplexing in themselves, and they are not strong and straight enough, because of the mess in which our national life is in, because of our inability and past failure to really build them up and think them through on solid ground.

● So, tradition having failed in this modern world of speed, we are restricted to reason or to force, and which have we tried? We have tried force because reason, you see, is too difficult. If you are going to govern the world and handle it and steer it, you have got to eliminate the thinking people. You must raise up mediocrity. You must make thought something to be spurned. Then you have a chance of using force. You see there is something psychologically true in this, because if we are going to go on living in a chaos of unresolved conflicts, then we have either got to enforce some way of holding them together, or else we will break in destruction.

These Fascists were smart enough to see that Society could not go on for very long with this polite policy, "I will go my way and you go yours. As long as we don't disturb each other, one is just as good as another. Let's not get too particular about examining foundations. Let's be pleasant and gentle and sweet and agreeable about all of these things."

They knew from experience that it would not work that way because life moved much quicker there toward its disastrous end then than is has been moving here. So Hitler and these men set out to hold that society together by force.

As H. G. Wells said in a book written some years ago, "They tried to put iron bands around the world to force it into co-ordination, into community, and they couldn't do it." It can never be done, but you can come awfully close to it.

Notice the relationship between fundamentalism as a religious group, Fascism and Communism, all of them having in common their rejection of reason, and in that same rejection comes the absolute necessity of resorting to force.

It is no wonder that Hitler rejected reason and made a philosophy of it. "We must distrust the intelligence and the conscience, and must trust our instincts. There is no basis for trusting in either the moral or scientific sense."

We are now again at the age of reason. The intellect has grown autocratic and has become a disease of life. Hitler is a demoniac figurehead of the way in which our whole cultural system has been moving. If this crisis that we have gone through, and are going through, and shall go through, because of him, brings us to the knowledge and realization that reason is the only way we will bring our world together, not by bands of steel, but through love, it shall have been worth while, in spite of the awful cost. It has to be learned!

I want to end by saying to you as I have said throughout: Do not ever forget that reason will not do for you what experience will do. Reason cannot be substituted for the mass of living, warm reality. Remember that religion will go on after reason has been destroyed because religion grows up in that warm reality and is basic to it. But if you destroy reason, you will lose the whole basis of religion, because then you will sink back into that instinctive animal level of life. Your reason can take the forces that drive you and stir them so that you can find more of the riches.

One man has put it this way, "The life of Man in the modern world is a high-powered car with tremendous capacity. You are driving along a single track road in a wild country on a dark night. The only lights you have are your headlights. The motor of that car is the sub-rational, physiological propulsion. The lights are reason. Darkness is the super-rational. The light of your reason is sometimes very dim. At the best, it does not throw a very wide arc. There are all kinds of darkness around you. You know you will never be able to see it all. But if you begin to distrust what that reason can show you and shut off your lights, you will find yourself in grief very quickly."

● We only see "through a glass darkly." There is darkness all around, but the light we do have, is the light of reason; and we know that we will only find our way through, providing we keep it burning. We realize that if in the future we are to know more than we do now, it will be because we nurture the light of reason and develop and enlarge it so that we, because of the beings that we are, with the kind of background we have, may rise into being what Jesus foretold we should be, Divine ourselves.

"Ye sons of the Living God, Ye shall know the truth and the truth shall set you free."